

**House Committee on Agriculture
Stockton, CA
March 3, 2006**

**Testimony by
Vito Chiesa
Chiesa Farms**

Introduction

Speaking today as a specialty crops farmer and a member of several agricultural organizations, I want to emphasize that our top priority is a US farm policy that builds a future for US agriculture that can compete in the world marketplace, meet urban pressures and comply with mounting environmental regulations. We want a farm policy that creates more market demands for our products, gives us the tools to be the most efficient and leading edge producers, and build the infrastructure to protect our crops and livestock from the introduction of pests and diseases that threaten our livelihood. This is a tall order but it's achievable under the next farm bill with reasonable and thoughtful expenditures.

Creating More Market Demand & Opportunity for US Producers

US farm policy should create more demand and opportunities for our bounty both domestically and abroad through promotion and more foreign market access.

Domestic Demand

Nutritional education and expanding the school fruit and vegetable snack program to more schools in every state is necessary to give our youth the tools to develop healthy eating habits from the start.

Foreign Market Development

Both the U.S. trade agenda and funding should be focused on foreign market development. With over 95% of the population living outside the U.S., it is critical that we lower tariffs and focus on promoting our products in those markets where we have the greatest potential. In the past farm bill, few dollars have been spent in the area of foreign market development. This next farm bill must give more support for programs, such as the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops and the Market Access Program.

Market Access

Unjustified trade barriers have replaced many of the traditional tariff barriers. Recently, Malaysia reported salmonella in our almond exports, halting California exports. India imposed methyl bromide fumigation requirements on almonds, threatening the US's largest agricultural export to India. The almond industry utilizes phosphine for the control of storage pests. The industry used Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) funds to study the efficacy of fumigating almonds with phosphine and presented this data to Indian officials for approval of its continued use. Though the problem has been temporarily resolved, it is programs like TASC that need additional funding to assist many of our specialty commodities in addressing unjustified trade barriers.

Market Access Program (MAP)

The Market Access Program has been very successful for both minor, as well as, major commodities in developing new markets. Utilization of this program has been an important contributor to the nut industry's success in world markets. With these funds, the nut industry

has been able to focus on market research and development in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Conservation

Farmers and ranchers are some of the best stewards of the land, and we represent the greatest potential for environmental gains such as saving species, carbon sequestration or renewable fuels. Conservation programs must focus on maintaining working landscapes to assist farmers and ranchers in resource management. The next farm bill should expand on those programs that have been successful for California.

Expanding EQIP

Increased funding levels for the EQIP and expanding it to allow more flexibility for what projects qualify for funding is important for California growers. The 2002 farm bill allocated \$5.8 billion over six years for the EQIP, which is not adequate to meet the project applications that are responding to the increase in air and water quality standards on agricultural lands.

In the past, our ranch received some cost sharing funds for a low volume irrigation system. It helped alleviate some water runoff concerns due to our proximity to local waterways. The advantages to our farm were less water use, and the use of less fertilizer due to focusing on a more concentrated root zone.

Any changes to the EQIP program must stipulate that the majority of funds should be allocated directly to farmers and ranchers where they can provide the greatest benefit to the environment. In addition, the granting of funds should be kept under local control, such as the EQIP working groups, where they are able to respond to the needs of each county.

Conservation funding should put greater emphasis on programs that promote active land management rather than permanent land retirement programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program. Active management of land can lead to long-term sustainable water and soil improvements, while retirement may not lead to environmental improvements but rather degradation.

Research

Research is where we find the solutions to managing resource, labor and pest and disease problems on our farms. More research dollars to develop the most advanced technology and management practice tools is critical to the long-term viability of our industry.

In California, for every dollar that is spent on wages, an additional 30 to 40 percent cost is incurred to pay for workers' compensation insurance, social security and other costs. In order to minimize the labor costs, growers are relying more and more on mechanization. Mechanization research saved the processed tomato industry. Such research has been sorely lacking since.

This research cannot go without the support of an infrastructure to gather and disseminate this information, which is achieved through our University of California extension programs. The UC extension programs provide the vehicle for information and tools to get to, and from, the field.

Pest & Disease Exclusion

California's Department of Food and Agriculture spends \$79 million annually in general fund spending for plant and animal pests and diseases. With constant pest and disease pressures and state budgetary constraints, we are concerned that funds will continue to be strained, while the threat of combating newly introduced pests and diseases will be a constant. The

introduction of a pest or disease to the state of California not only becomes a costly burden to the state's budget but also to the impacted industry. Our agricultural producers are dealing with the impacts of Pierce's disease, Medfly, Newcastle Disease and Sudden Oak Death, all pests and diseases that have cost our industry millions to eradicate. We also face the pending threats of Citrus Canker, Avian Influenza and Foot and Mouth disease that can demolish our industries.

In an effort to protect our plants, animals and environment we need to re-evaluate the allocation of resources within the Department of Homeland Security for pest and disease detection. Is there the manpower and knowledge needed to test and detect pests and diseases that come through our points of entry?

We also need to ask, if the U.S. Department of Agriculture has the resources available to gather and review data on the threat of foreign pests and diseases entering on plants and plant products? Foreign producers of plants and plant products are eager to get access to the U.S. market and we need have the reassurance that those products entering pose no pest or disease risk to our environment.

Reliable Workforce

At the peak of our harvest season we employ over 450,000 workers in California agriculture. That level compares to roughly 250,000 year-round employees. The outcome of immigration reform by Congress is critical to our industry. It is essential, both for the industry and the safety of our workers that we arrive at a workable, legal and practical guest worker program. Satisfactory resolution of the immigration issue is the singly most critical to California agriculture and the state's economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I hope you will take all of these things into consideration when constructing the next farm bill.